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Professional Resource:

Digital Storytelling in the Classroom:

New Media Pathways to Literacy, Learning, and Creativity (2008)

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Digital Storytelling in the Classroom: New Media Pathways to Literacy, Learning, and Creativity.

by Jason Ohler.

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With the self-proclaimed target audience of “the vast majority of teachers who have limited access to technology,” Jason Ohler’s *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom: New Media Pathways to Literacy, Learning, and Creativity* is a user-friendly guide to incorporating new media into the classroom by engaging students through storytelling (xii). While this initially seems to be applicable only to English or Reading teachers (Ohler himself uses the standards developed by the National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association as support for the validity of digital storytelling to promote literacy), he asserts throughout his explication of storytelling that all content areas can benefit from the incorporation of story into the classroom.

Ohler is quick to acknowledge that his audience is one with many obligations and very little time. Because of this, *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom* is divided into three easily navigated sections: Part I—Storytelling, Education, and the New Media, Part II—The Art and Practice of Storytelling, and Part III—Going Digital. In these sections, Ohler’s objective is to illustrate the value of digital storytelling in encouraging student learning and engagement and to enable teachers of all technical abilities to incorporate digital storytelling in their classrooms.

In Part I, Ohler discusses the importance of storytelling, its relationship to technology, and its place in education. Drawing from the current use of iPods

and cell phones to tell stories, he begins by asserting that, no matter what technology comes in the future, people will use it to fulfill the inherent need to tell their story. At the core of storytelling within education, however, is the concept of literacy. “Digital stories combine traditional and emerging literacies, engaging otherwise reluctant students in literacy development,” particularly in the realm of media literacy (11). Ohler recognizes that, while there are varied explanations of what it means to be media literate, it is increasingly necessary for students to learn *about* media as well as *with* media. Digital storytelling provides a means for media production, thereby teaching media literacy in conjunction with other more “traditional” forms of literacy.

As Ohler walks the reader through the various elements of a successful digital story, he uses student samples and draws from his conversations with teachers in order to clearly explain what makes a particular digital story effective. Teachers with no prior knowledge regarding digital storytelling are able to grasp the necessary fundamentals of a digital story: genre, resonance, active/passive viewing, point of view, emotional engagement, tone, spoken narrative, soundtrack, creativity, media grammar, and more. In addition, the reader is able to see how each element connects to literacy development, inquiry, and the backwards design used by most educators. In a chapter dedicated solely to the assessment of digital stories, Ohler draws direct connections between the use of “traditional” and new media, demonstrating that digital “story creation produces a cornucopia of assessable material, much of which is ‘traditional’ in nature” (66). Possible traits for assessing digital stories include project planning, research, content comprehension, writing,

flow/organization/pacing, and citations/permissions, all of which are standard traits on rubrics for assessing academic writing.

Because the foundation of any high-quality digital story, regardless of subject matter, is a good story, Part II of *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom* addresses stories themselves and how to create a good one. While the discussion of “story” may initially inspire thoughts of novels or short stories taught in a Language Arts curriculum, good stories can be told within any subject area. For example, a science teacher can incorporate story into the explanation of photosynthesis or the law of gravity, while a social studies teacher can use story in order to clarify various historical events for students. Often, as emphasized by Ohler, the use of story is much more effective than lecture because story is memorable—if asked to repeat concepts taught, even hours later, students have often forgotten the material. When asked to repeat a story, however, student recall is much better.

Ohler instructs educators to begin teaching digital storytelling with instruction on the story core—the three elements being the central problem/challenge, the transformation of the character, and the resolution of the challenge. Once students are able to identify these elements of a story, they are then able to begin deconstructing all stories, no matter what form they take, which “can be an effective beginning point for the study of media” (75). In addition, the story core acts as a very useful starting point in the assessment of digital stories.

In this section, Ohler also discusses the need for storyboarding, which “show[s] the flow of story motion” as well as story mapping, which “show[s] the flow of story emotion” (77). He addresses story mapping extensively, emphasizing the necessity of emotional connection if one is to create an affective and effective story. With the presentation of various versions of Visual Portraits of a Story (VPS), this section becomes a valuable resource for any teacher who addresses storytelling in any way, whether in the examination of others’ writing or in the creation of original work. By walking through the use of a story map in the creation of his own map, Ohler demonstrates the effectiveness of story mapping in story creation; what starts as a flat, boring anecdote quickly becomes an engaging tale when examined with the proper lenses and adapted accordingly. This exercise alone demonstrates the ease with which a classroom teacher can incorporate

these principles into an existing curriculum, making it that much easier to move into the realm of digital storytelling.

It is also in Part II, “The Art and Practice of Storytelling” that Ohler discusses Bloom’s Cognitive and Affective Taxonomies. He contends that educators and students can use these taxonomies in the transformation of their characters and themselves. By focusing on these elements within digital stories, teachers are able “to help students tell more effective stories...to understand students through their stories... [and] to help students grow through their stories” (111-112). While not many would say that these are unimportant teaching objectives, employing educational theory in the creation of digital story can further enable an educator (and parents, administrators, and school boards) to see the worthwhile nature of digital storytelling.

It is not until the final section, “Going Digital,” that Ohler directly addresses technology itself, for as he reminds the reader throughout, “if you don’t have a good story to tell, the technology just makes it more obvious” (5-6). It is here that he illustrates the media production process, demystifying it for those who may be intimidated by the prospect of creating digital stories.

Comparing media production to the step-by-step process of cake baking, Ohler walks the reader through the five phases of making media: story planning, preproduction, production, postproduction, and performance/posting/showing/distribution. Within each phase of production, Ohler explains the process, gives advice regarding how best to make each process go as smoothly as possible, and takes care to warn teachers of possible pitfalls or difficulties that may arise. In addition, he provides a list of helpful equipment and advice (though not product endorsement, as he is very careful to point out) regarding hardware and software that has proven useful in his digital storytelling process. In recommending technological equipment, Ohler continually points out that technology does not necessarily need to be the best and most expensive in order to be effective. Digital storytelling can be done at very little actual cost to the teacher, if effort is put into locating and accessing inexpensive resources.

In closing *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom*, Ohler very necessarily addresses copyright and fair use. As with anything involving digital media, digital storytelling inherently lends itself to copyright infringement through the use of music, images, video

and other media that have been created by someone other than the student. Ohler's philosophy is very sound—that it's best just to ask permission—but he does address various other means of approaching the issue of fair use in education. His three rules of respect regarding digital media are logical enough that students and teachers alike should be able to avoid trouble: 1-citation, 2-permission, and 3-compensation. This final chapter on how to avoid copyright issues altogether round out this powerful resource for incorporating digital storytelling within a curriculum.

As an introduction to digital storytelling and all of its possibilities within the classroom, *Digital Storytelling in the Classroom: New Media Pathways to Literacy, Learning, and Creativity* is a worthwhile resource. In addition to being conversational, Ohler's writing is practical, making it very easy for a teacher to see how and where various principles could be incorporated into his or her curriculum. And for educators interested in incorporating media literacy, Ohler's text offers teachers a content-driven approach to media literacy through the creation of digital stories.